

## **In the Land of Shinar**

*Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there... Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves ..."*

*Genesis 11:1-4*

Shimming himself in between the chain-link fence post and the concrete wall, Manuel straightened his thin body rigid and placed one foot onto the plateau of the wash. He turned his head sideways and kept it still, making sure not to catch his right ear on the wire, or scrape his left against the wall. He had snuck onto the wash this way hundreds of times: during the day, and sometimes at night; sometimes with his homies, but not mostly; mostly he was by himself walking home from school, like now, when he passed through at his own pace.

Five days in a row, he thought, balancing on one foot, reaching back through the gap to pick up his shoe—a black corduroy slipper—that had fallen off on the other side of the fence. He wondered if they would call home after five days of leaving at lunch. Since they took official roll in second period, he doubted it; and since his father hadn't said anything to him in the last four days, he didn't have cause to think different.

Slipping his shoe back on, Manuel looked down at the smashed beer cartons and broken glass in and about the dried weeds that lined the fence—the bits of brown and green glass that had the dull luster of uncut gems—and in his head he heard: "I'm gonna' kill you, you fuckin' wetback," and he saw himself throw the silicone spark-plug chip against the driver-side window of the Cutlass, watching as it silently cracked into a jigsaw puzzle of glass, and then busting it in with his fist. He remembered leaning in the car and grabbing for the pull-out stereo, seeing his hand bleeding, the sound

of a screen door flying open, looking up and seeing the white blur coming at him, and running—he had never run so hard in his life, he thought, as that night—five blocks straight to the wash without ever looking back to the beating thud of bare feet behind him, to the pursuer whose deep guttural shouts were voiced in a fatigued and desperate anticipation.

Manuel walked to the edge of the plateau, kicking at the spot where the dirt became concrete. He walked with a strut, but he had to think about it, and he would often find himself without it when thinking of something else. As he walked his hands were constantly moving: adjusting his khaki pants that were three sizes too big, and checking the Pee-Chee folder he carried folded lengthwise in his back pocket, which kept his T-shirt from falling too far down in the back—to prevent this same thing from happening in the front, he was continually gathering up the white shirt and sticking either one or both of his hands in his front pockets.

“Damn fat-ass mother fucker,” Manuel mumbled to himself. That was what his homies had called the man after he told them what had happened: how he had eluded the man in the wash; how the man hadn’t been able to fit through the gap; how he heard, as he ran down the wash, the fading sound of the man coughing in violent spasm.

Manuel felt his stomach get sick just thinking about the sound. He was standing at the edge of the plateau, and before him, the concrete sloped down to the bottom of the wash on either side. Chavo was right, Manuel thought. Chavo was older—a lifer who still hung out with the younger *vatos* when he wasn’t pounding out dents and slapping Bondo on wrecks over at Diamond Auto Body. Chavo was there when Manuel had walked all the way to the park to tell his brother what happened. They were all at the benches, drinking beers and listening to “Daddy’s Home” on an oldies station.

“Fucking little Loco,” he remembered Chavo saying. “You’re lucky he didn’t catch you, *ese*. He would’ve strung your ass up on that fence. They take that shit personal.”

“I didn’t even take the shit, and he still wanted to kill me.”

“See, *ese?* They take it personal. It don’t matter. It’s like you fucked their daughter or something.”

He remembered his brother and Spanky bending over in drunken laughter at what Chavo said, pounding and slapping the marked-up bench top, and how Chavo turned to him trying to keep a straight face: “You didn’t fuck their daughter, did you? Huh, *chico?*” They all laughed again even louder.

“Maybe he fucked the family dog, aye?” his brother added, stopping just long enough to say it, then laughing hysterically.

“Shit, he would’ve killed his ass for sure then; that’s worse than fucking their daughters.”

Manuel looked up at the gray horizon: it towered above the faded stucco backsides of apartment complexes that lined the wash. Here was the only place where he ever noticed the sky, where he ever felt the sky as a presence. Maybe it was the solitude of the wash, or just its hard, open space that made the sky seem so immense, so alive. Whichever it was he couldn’t say, but it was as if God were looking down on him, and he didn’t like that feeling. He remembered the nude man they had seen wandering in the wash, and how they chased him, his brother and Spanky drunk and laughing.

They cornered him near a sewer tunnel, out of which a thin mossy film drained into the wash. “What’s up wit’ch you, *vato?*” Spanky said. They were not laughing anymore.

“Angels behold,” the man kept mumbling, sporadically waving his arms as though swatting at a cloud of gnats, his wild blue eyes staring off into the sky. Manuel remembered following the man’s eyes, ashamed to look at his body: how they floated—glassy—in their sockets, looking up over the concrete banks that isolated the bottom of the wash; and how he had to look down away from them. He remembered the sewage that dripped down the man’s legs and over the veins of his muddied feet, and how black specks of it, kicked up from running, dotted the white skin of his sweating torso, which expanded and contracted with the violence of his breathing.

“Man, what the fuck is he saying?” Spanky had been watching the man’s jerky hand fits but talked as though the man

wasn't there, as though he was watching television. "Man, what the fuck are you saying?"

"Angels behold the face of my father!" the man yelled, looking past Spanky straight into the eyes of Manuel's brother. "Do you know who my father is?" He had stopped waving his arms and continued to look at Manuel's brother.

Manuel remembered how his brother looked away from the man's gaze, shifting his feet and squinting over to where Spanky stood, and how he had wanted to strike the man at that moment, to hit him as hard as he could and pound his head into the concrete for singling out his brother.

"Fuck your father!" Spanky yelled.

"No!" The man now turned his eyes on Spanky. "No. My father is the father of all, for I am the son of God. Do you know who Jesus Christ is?"

Manuel remembered the sensation he felt in his stomach at that moment: a gooey viscidness that started in his stomach, gradually working its way into his chest and throat, leaving him voiceless and wanting to go home.

His shoulders slouched, Manuel stood at the edge of the plateau. He was no longer looking at the horizon, but at a Mexican blanket that hung as a blind in a third story apartment window across the wash. It was a bright orange, multi-colored blanket like the type his father's friend Rosendo, who everyone called "Rick," sold at the San Fernando Swap Meet. That is, when he wasn't selling his glass jewelry illicitly in supermarket parking lots out of his beat-up, white van. Manuel knew he could get Rick to pretend to be his father and talk to the people from school if they ever called. Rick was born in the United States and spoke English without an accent. He had helped his father get his first job when he came over alone ten years ago from Mexico without speaking a word of English, a year before he returned to Mexico for the last time to bring Manuel, his brother, and his mother over.

Manuel thought of how his father would always insist upon showing Rick their wool blankets whenever he visited—the blankets Manuel's grandmother had made for his father, and that he and

his brother used to sleep on in Mexico. He could picture how his father, trying to speak English, would offer the blankets for Rick to touch: "Feel," his father would say, "feel." He could picture the anticipation in his father's eyes as he would shake and tug violently at the blankets in Rick's hands: "Strong," he would say, "thick, no?" Then how his father would hug himself: "*Mucho* warm. *Mucho bueno*, no?" And how Rick would speak in Spanish for his father: "*Si, si, pero...*," explaining with friendly callousness how their blankets were too itchy for the sensitive skin of Americans, and how they weren't colorful enough, weren't Mexican enough for Americans. "Aaach!" his father would interrupt, angry and not listening. Then he would gather up the blankets, holding them up against his chest in an attempt to keep them from dragging on the floor, and carefully, without being able to see over or around them, make his way into the bedroom, while Rick, laughing, would turn to whoever else was there saying: "*Que?... What?*"

Tucking and untucking his T-shirt, Manuel remembered the awkward silence that followed the last dead notes of laughter when he alone was left with Rick, both of them watching the pitiful, proud man disappear into the bedroom with his blankets falling between his legs and dragging across the floor behind him.

"Hey, *que royo, joy?*" he blurted, turning to Manuel excitedly and offering him his hand.

"*Nada.*" Manuel remembered the confusion he felt hearing Rick speak in the dialect that Chavo and Spanky and other *cholos* used.

"Nothing," he repeated and shook his hand.

Rick laughed and looked toward his father's bedroom. "You know your father has no business sense, don't you?"

Manuel didn't say anything, and pretended not to understand. He tensed his body as Rick reached out and put his hand on his shoulder, watching the small glass pendants swing back and forth on the necklaces that hung loosely away from his chest as he leaned over.

"You know about the deal I have with your brother, don't you?—with Spanky and all those *vatos?*" Rick said, looking toward

his father's bedroom, then back at him. "No?...What, they don't talk business with you younger *vatos*? Damn, and I thought *cholos* looked out for each other." He laughed and looked again towards his father's room, "Listen," he said lowering his voice, "anytime you get a stereo or anything, I got buyers. I can get you cash, *mota*, anything in return..."

Feeling the sting of the afternoon sun burning down on the back of his neck, Manuel turned his head. At the edge of the plateau, the concrete banks of the wash looked like they were glowing under the sun, and they deflected the white light into his eyes as he looked down the wash bottom, squinting. It was empty. Five days in a row, Manuel thought, five days of leaving at lunch. Would they call home today? What would his father say if they did ever call home? He took a step forward and descended the steep sloping embankment, his feet moving uncontrollably faster and faster and sharply slapping against the concrete through the thin soles of his black slippers. Running in the shadow before him, he saw the jerky uncontrolled restraint of his inevitable progression forward in his own movement, and thought of the gypsy boy whom he had seen walk barefoot over broken glass in Mexico. Jumping with a slapping skid onto the wash bottom, he remembered how the older gypsy men had brushed the slivers of glass from the soles of the small boy's leather-calloused feet.

The balls of his own feet throbbing, Manuel began his walk home on the wash bottom, avoiding the entrenched channel that ran down the center of the wash along its entirety. It was an especially gray winter many years ago that he and his brother had stood on the rainy overpass, and looking down at the bottom, found the channel invisible beneath a rushing surface of brown water. Dead rats and a water snake passed beneath them, tossing and turning in the violent current. However, today, like most days, the sides of the wash were dry, and the only water moving was the slow sewage in the channel, and in the thin mossy areas where smaller sewage tunnels drained into the channel from the embankment; and it was there where Manuel had to watch his footing.

As he walked, he imagined that the stadium-like embank-

ment that surrounded him was filled with people watching him, and as he stepped through the thin, mossy film of a waste-tunnel without slipping, the lifeless concrete embankment would erupt into a bustling crowd of colors and people jumping to their feet, shouting. He saw his father's red face at a distance, and the gold fillings in Rick's open mouth. He saw his brother and Spanky slapping each other and pointing, and as he checked the position of his Pee-Chee and found it in place, there was a sigh of relief and he could hear the crowd as they settled back into their seats. He saw the backs of students' heads, and his fifth period History teacher staring at him: he was standing next to a chalky blackboard with an eraser in his hand. He had asked Manuel the dates of the Civil War and was waiting, waiting. And the glare off the lenses of the man's glasses had caused his eyes to appear obscured to Manuel at the back of the class, even beyond the usual distortion caused by the lenses' thickness, and one by one the heads turned, waiting.

Manuel wondered what they'd been covering for the past week. "Fuck them," he mumbled, stopping to pick up a brown beer bottle, its label faded almost colorless from the sun. "Mother fucker!" He threw the bottle against the concrete embankment, watching as it disintegrated, small slivers of glass sliding down the slope. "Mother fucker," he said again and examined his hand; somewhere behind him he heard the faint murmur of disappointment in the crowd, then nothing.

Manuel knew he was nearing home when he saw the overturned shopping cart in the channel. It was here where he crossed the channel to get to the side of the wash he lived on. He stuck close to the embankment until he reached this point, avoiding the stench in the channel, and the gnats that seemed to breed there and claim it as their own.

How the shopping cart got lodged in the channel he never knew, but it had always been there. The wheels were gone, and the chrome-plated bars of the cart had chipped and become rusted over; its bent cage, while not hitting the bottom of the channel, acted as a strainer in the sewage to which gray-green moss clung and

cultivated itself until the level dropped. Once the sewage level dropped, the moss that clung would dry-up on the bars, while the rest would dissipate somewhere down the channel until another obstruction would allow it to live. Running, Manuel crossed the channel holding his breath and waving his arms in front of his face.

One the other side, he headed for the shelter of the concrete overpass, his eyes searching the dark shadow that fell beneath it. His homies sometimes hung here, but as he entered into the shade, and his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see there was no one around. He looked up the embankment where the cement was cool and rough under the overpass; it was there, in the crevice where the upper plateau of the wash met with the bottom of the overpass, that he had crawled, his legs aching, the night he was chased by that man. He remembered how he'd never stopped running until he got there, and then the nervous euphoria he felt when he finally did stop, his lungs sore and burning for air, his head and body pounding with his heart, sweating and freezing in the night air. He had sat under there for a long time, his body bent over and his head between his knees, his feet resting on the sloped embankment, thinking of his brother and listening to the minutest sound of every car that passed directly above him. He hadn't know then what the silence of the wash was like at night; it was only in thinking back he realized its similarity to the silence that a child feels pervading a dark room after his father has finished a beating.

He would ascend the embankment here, to the plateau where a hole had been cut in the chain-link fence, but first he had to take a piss. He unzipped his pants. In front of him were the elaborate scrawlings his homies had tagged on the embankment: one was a mural that Chavo had done using multi-colored spray cans—he had stolen them from a commercial art class he had been taking at the J.C.—but it was faded, and had already been X'd over by some *cholos* from T13. His urine hit the embankment and splattered, forming a puddle near his feet that would evaporate before it could meander into the channel.

Manuel cupped his hands tightly over his head and smoothed his thick black hair back: it still felt hot under his palms, and sticky



from the Three Flowers he used to keep it down and shiny. He smelled his hands and then wiped them on his pants, trying to get the gel off from in between his fingers. The smell reminded him of his brother and Spanky, and he looked over to where Chavo had crossed-out T13 with a black X and, right next to it, hit-up all their names. He recognized most of them—"Chavo," "Spanky," his brother, who was known as "Largo," and his own name "lil Loco" near the bottom—but the others had either been jumped-out a long time ago, were in jail, or Chavo had hit 'em up posthumously.

"Where you from, *vato*?" he heard in his head, picturing three *cholos* from T13. He saw them approaching through the plate glass window at Ruby's Famous. "Where you from?" "Where you from?" "Where you from?" "Nowhere," Manuel remembered saying, "Nowhere." "Aren't you Largo's little brother?" In his head he could picture pink skin rubbing against a stiff black collar. "Where you from?" And he could see the black letters—an L. "Nowhere," he had said—an A. "Don't give me that! What are you doin' here? What are you doin' here?"—a P. "*Nada. Nada*," he said, pretending not to understand, his eyes staring off over the black collar—a D.

Would he look his father in the eye? Five days in a row, Manuel thought. Have they already called home? Official roll is in second period. He zipped up his pants and kneeled down on one knee to pick a pebble out from one of his loose fitting slippers. Yes, his father hated his shoes. Manuel could picture his father, the shoemaker from Mexico, standing there in his tight-fitting leather shoes—the same pair he'd been wearing since leaving Mexico, the same pair he resoled with the rubber of a worn-out automobile tire.

"Have you studied today, Manuel?"

"A little, father."

"Have you seen your brother today, Manuel?"

"No, father."

"*Manuelo*, why are you afraid of your father?"

"Afraid?"

"*Si, Maneulo*, why do you stand so far? Speak to me, *Manuelo*. You cannot speak to your father?"

Manuel remembered his voicelessness in front of the nude man, and how he could only look over to his brother and mumble that he wanted to go home.

“Shut up,” his brother said, his eyes steady on the nude man’s profile. “Go home if you want!”

“Do you know Satan is loose on earth?” the man shouted at Spanky.

“Man, I’m Satan, mother fucker! This is my hell, so what the fuck you gonna’ do?”

Manuel remembered the look in Spanky’s eyes—how they had become like the man’s eyes—and the skewed progression that followed: the man squirming and covering himself; the urine escaping from his cupped hands; Spanky yelling “mother fucker” and hitting him solidly on the side of the mouth; how he and his brother kicked him three times in the side, and how the man’s body felt soft and heavy against his foot; then the sound of his cries echoing down the empty wash into his ears as he ran, thinking—for the first time in his life—that he was a sinner, and bound for hell.